

CHAPTER II—WHAT SHE HAD BEEN

What she had been, what I should be, these were the two great subjects between us in my boyhood, and while we discussed the one we were deciding the other, though neither of us knew it.

Before I reached my tenth year a giant entered my native place in the night, and we woke to find him in possession. He transformed it into a new town at a rate with which we boys only could keep up, for as fast as he built dams we made rafts to sail in them; he knocked down houses, and there we were crying 'Pilly!' among the ruins; he dug trenches, and we jumped them; we had to be dragged by the legs from beneath his engines, he sunk wells, and in we went. But though there were never circumstances to which boys could not adapt themselves in half an hour, older folk are slower in the uptake, and I am sure they stood and gaped at the changes so suddenly being worked in our midst, and scarce knew their way home now in the dark. Where had been formerly but the click of the shuttle was soon the roar of 'power,' handlooms were pushed into a corner as a room is cleared for a dance; every morning at half-past five the town was wakened with a yell, and from a chimney-stack that rose high into our caller air the conqueror waved for evermore his flag of smoke. Another era had dawned, new customs, new fashions sprang into life, all as lusty as if they had been born at twenty-one; as quickly as two people may exchange seats, the daughter, till now but a knitter of stockings, became the breadwinner, he who had been the breadwinner sat down to the knitting of stockings: what had been yesterday a nest of weavers was to-day a town of girls.

I am not of those who would fling stones at the change; it is something, surely, that backs are no longer prematurely bent; you may no more look through dim panes of glass at the aged poor weaving tremulously for their little bit of ground in the cemetery. Rather are their working years too few now, not because they will it so but because it is with youth that the power-looms must be fed. Well, this teaches them to make provision, and they have the means as they never had before. Not in batches are boys now sent to college; the half-dozen a year have dwindled to one, doubtless because in these days they can begin to draw wages as they step out of their fourteenth year. Here assuredly there is loss, but all the losses would be but a pebble in a sea of gain were it not for this, that

with so many of the family, young mothers among them, working in the factories, home life is not so beautiful as it was. So much of what is great in Scotland has sprung from the closeness of the family ties; it is there I sometimes fear that my country is being struck. That we are all being reduced to one dead level, that character abounds no more and life itself is less interesting, such things I have read, but I do not believe them. I have even seen them given as my reason for writing of a past time, and in that at least there is no truth. In our little town, which is a sample of many, life is as interesting, as pathetic, as joyous as ever it was; no group of weavers was better to look at or think about than the rivulet of winsome girls that overruns our streets every time the sluice is raised, the comedy of summer evenings and winter firesides is played with the old zest and every window-blind is the curtain of a romance. Once the lights of a little town are lit, who could ever hope to tell all its story, or the story of a single wynd in it? And who looking at lighted windows needs to turn to books? The reason my books deal with the past instead of with the life I myself have known is simply this, that I soon grow tired of writing tales unless I can see a little girl, of whom my mother has told me, wandering confidently through the pages. Such a grip has her memory of her girlhood had upon me since I was a boy of six.

Those innumerable talks with her made her youth as vivid to me as my own, and so much more quaint, for, to a child, the oddest of things, and the most richly coloured picture-book, is that his mother was once a child also, and the contrast between what she is and what she was is perhaps the source of all humour. My mother's father, the one hero of her life, died nine years before I was born, and I remember this with bewilderment, so familiarly does the weather-beaten mason's figure rise before me from the old chair on which I was nursed and now write my books. On the surface he is as hard as the stone on which he chiselled, and his face is dyed red by its dust, he is rounded in the shoulders and a 'hoast' hunts him ever; sooner or later that cough must carry him off, but until then it shall not keep him from the quarry, nor shall his chapped hands, as long as they can grasp the mell. It is a night of rain or snow, and my mother, the little girl in a pinafore who is already his housekeeper, has been many times to the door to look for him. At last he draws nigh, hoasting. Or I see him setting off to church, for he was a great 'stoop' of the Auld Licht kirk, and his mouth is very firm now as if there were a case of discipline to face, but on his way home he is bowed

with pity. Perhaps his little daughter who saw him so stern an hour ago does not understand why he wrestles so long in prayer to-night, or why when he rises from his knees he presses her to him with unwonted tenderness. Or he is in this chair repeating to her his favourite poem, 'The Cameronian's Dream,' and at the first lines so solemnly uttered,

'In a dream of the night I was wafted away,'

she screams with excitement, just as I screamed long afterwards when she repeated them in his voice to me. Or I watch, as from a window, while she sets off through the long parks to the distant place where he is at work, in her hand a flagon which contains his dinner. She is singing to herself and gleefully swinging the flagon, she jumps the burn and proudly measures the jump with her eye, but she never dallies unless she meets a baby, for she was so fond of babies that she must hug each one she met, but while she hugged them she also noted how their robes were cut, and afterwards made paper patterns, which she concealed jealously, and in the fulness of time her first robe for her eldest born was fashioned from one of these patterns, made when she was in her twelfth year.

She was eight when her mother's death made her mistress of the house and mother to her little brother, and from that time she scrubbed and mended and baked and sewed, and argued with the flesher about the quarter pound of beef and penny bone which provided dinner for two days (but if you think that this was poverty you don't know the meaning of the word), and she carried the water from the pump, and had her washing-days and her ironings and a stocking always on the wire for odd moments, and gossiped like a matron with the other women, and humoured the men with a tolerant smile—all these things she did as a matter of course, leaping joyful from bed in the morning because there was so much to do, doing it as thoroughly and sedately as if the brides were already due for a lesson, and then rushing out in a fit of childishness to play dumps or palaulays with others of her age. I see her frocks lengthening, though they were never very short, and the games given reluctantly up. The horror of my boyhood was that I knew a time would come when I also must give up the games, and how it was to be done I saw not (this agony still returns to me in dreams, when I catch myself playing marbles, and look on with cold displeasure); I felt that I must continue playing in secret, and I took this shadow to her, when she told me her own experience, which convinced us both that we were very

like each other inside. She had discovered that work is the best fun after all, and I learned it in time, but have my lapses, and so had she.

I know what was her favourite costume when she was at the age that they make heroines of: it was a pale blue with a pale blue bonnet, the white ribbons of which tied aggravatingly beneath the chin, and when questioned about this garb she never admitted that she looked pretty in it, but she did say, with blushes too, that blue was her colour, and then she might smile, as at some memory, and begin to tell us about a man who—but it ended there with another smile which was longer in departing. She never said, indeed she denied strenuously, that she had led the men a dance, but again the smile returned, and came between us and full belief. Yes, she had her little vanities; when she got the Mizpah ring she did carry that finger in such a way that the most reluctant must see. She was very particular about her gloves, and hid her boots so that no other should put them on, and then she forgot their hiding-place, and had suspicions of the one who found them. A good way of enraging her was to say that her last year's bonnet would do for this year without alteration, or that it would defy the face of clay to count the number of her shawls. In one of my books there is a mother who is setting off with her son for the town to which he had been called as minister, and she pauses on the threshold to ask him anxiously if he thinks her bonnet 'sets' her. A reviewer said she acted thus, not because she cared how she looked, but for the sake of her son. This, I remember, amused my mother very much.

I have seen many weary on-dings of snow, but the one I seem to recollect best occurred nearly twenty years before I was born. It was at the time of my mother's marriage to one who proved a most loving as he was always a well-loved husband, a man I am very proud to be able to call my father. I know not for how many days the snow had been falling, but a day came when the people lost heart and would make no more gullies through it, and by next morning to do so was impossible, they could not fling the snow high enough. Its back was against every door when Sunday came, and none ventured out save a valiant few, who buffeted their way into my mother's home to discuss her predicament, for unless she was 'cried' in the church that day she might not be married for another week, and how could she be cried with the minister a field away and the church buried to the waist? For hours they talked, and at last some men started for the church, which was several hundred yards distant. Three of them found

a window, and forcing a passage through it, cried the pair, and that is how it came about that my father and mother were married on the first of March.

That would be the end, I suppose, if it were a story, but to my mother it was only another beginning, and not the last. I see her bending over the cradle of her first-born, college for him already in her eye (and my father not less ambitious), and anon it is a girl who is in the cradle, and then another girl—already a tragic figure to those who know the end. I wonder if any instinct told my mother that the great day of her life was when she bore this child; what I am sure of is that from the first the child followed her with the most wistful eyes and saw how she needed help and longed to rise and give it. For of physical strength my mother had never very much; it was her spirit that got through the work, and in those days she was often so ill that the sand rained on the doctor's window, and men ran to and fro with leeches, and 'she is in life, we can say no more' was the information for those who came knocking at the door. 'I am sorrow to say,' her father writes in an old letter now before me, 'that Margaret is in a state that she was never so bad before in this world. Till Wednesday night she was in as poor a condition as you could think of to be alive. However, after bleeding, leeching, etc., the Dr. says this morning that he is better hoped now, but at present we can say no more but only she is alive and in the hands of Him in whose hands all our lives are. I can give you no adequate view of what my feelings are, indeed they are a burden too heavy for me and I cannot describe them. I look on my right and left hand and find no comfort, and if it were not for the rock that is higher than I my spirit would utterly fall, but blessed be His name who can comfort those that are cast down. O for more faith in His supporting grace in this hour of trial.'

Then she is 'on the mend,' she may 'thole thro" if they take great care of her, 'which we will be forward to do.' The fourth child dies when but a few weeks old, and the next at two years. She was her grandfather's companion, and thus he wrote of her death, this stern, self-educated Auld Licht with the chapped hands:—

'I hope you received my last in which I spoke of Dear little Lydia being unwell. Now with deep sorrow I must tell you that yesterday I assisted in laying her dear remains in the lonely grave. She died at 7 o'clock on Wednesday evening, I suppose by the time you had got the letter. The Dr. did not think it was croup till late on Tuesday night,

and all that Medical aid could prescribe was done, but the Dr. had no hope after he saw that the croup was confirmed, and hard indeed would the heart have been that would not have melted at seeing what the dear little creature suffered all Wednesday until the feeble frame was quite worn out. She was quite sensible till within 2 hours of her death, and then she sunk quite low till the vital spark fled, and all medicine that she got she took with the greatest readiness, as if apprehensive they would make her well. I cannot well describe my feelings on the occasion. I thought that the fountain-head of my tears had now been dried up, but I have been mistaken, for I must confess that the briny rivulets descended fast on my furrowed cheeks, she was such a winning Child, and had such a regard for me and always came and told me all her little things, and as she was now speaking, some of her little prattle was very taking, and the lively images of these things intrude themselves more into my mind than they should do, but there is allowance for moderate grief on such occasions. But when I am telling you of my own grief and sorrow, I know not what to say of the bereaved Mother, she hath not met with anything in this world before that hath gone so near the quick with her. She had no handling of the last one as she was not able at the time, for she only had her once in her arms, and her affections had not time to be so fairly entwined around her. I am much afraid that she will not soon if ever get over this trial. Although she was weakly before, yet she was pretty well recovered, but this hath not only affected her mind, but her body is so much affected that she is not well able to sit so long as her bed is making and hath scarcely tasted meat [i.e. food] since Monday night, and till some time is elapsed we cannot say how she may be. There is none that is not a Parent themselves that can fully sympathise with one in such a state. David is much affected also, but it is not so well known on him, and the younger branches of the family are affected but it will be only momentary. But alas in all this vast ado, there is only the sorrow of the world which worketh death. O how gladdening would it be if we were in as great bitterness for sin as for the loss of a first-born. O how unfitted persons or families is for trials who knows not the divine art of casting all their cares upon the Lord, and what multitudes are there that when earthly comforts is taken away, may well say What have I more? all their delight is placed in some one thing or another in the world, and who can blame them for unwillingly parting with what they esteem their chief good? O that we were wise to lay up treasure for the time of need, for it is truly a solemn affair to

enter the lists with the king of terrors. It is strange that the living lay the things so little to heart until they have to engage in that war where there is no discharge. O that my head were waters and mine eyes a fountain of tears that I might weep day and night for my own and others' stupidity in this great matter. O for grace to do every day work in its proper time and to live above the tempting cheating train of earthly things. The rest of the family are moderately well. I have been for some days worse than I have been for 8 months past, but I may soon get better. I am in the same way I have often been in before, but there is no security for it always being so, for I know that it cannot be far from the time when I will be one of those that once were. I have no other news to send you, and as little heart for them. I hope you will take the earliest opportunity of writing that you can, and be particular as regards Margaret, for she requires consolation.'

He died exactly a week after writing this letter, but my mother was to live for another forty-four years. And joys of a kind never shared in by him were to come to her so abundantly, so long drawn out that, strange as it would have seemed to him to know it, her fuller life had scarce yet begun. And with the joys were to come their sweet, frightened comrades pain and grief; again she was to be touched to the quick, again and again to be so ill that 'she is in life, we can say no more,' but still she had attendants very 'forward' to help her, some of them unborn in her father's time.

She told me everything, and so my memories of our little red town are coloured by her memories. I knew it as it had been for generations, and suddenly I saw it change, and the transformation could not fail to strike a boy, for these first years are the most impressionable (nothing that happens after we are twelve matters very much); they are also the most vivid years when we look back, and more vivid the farther we have to look, until, at the end, what lies between bends like a hoop, and the extremes meet. But though the new town is to me a glass through which I look at the old, the people I see passing up and down these wynds, sitting, nightcapped, on their barrow-shafts, hobbling in their blacks to church on Sunday, are less those I saw in my childhood than their fathers and mothers who did these things in the same way when my mother was young. I cannot picture the place without seeing her, as a little girl, come to the door of a certain house and beat her bass against the gav'le-end, or there is a wedding to-night, and the carriage with the

white-eared horse is sent for a maiden in pale blue, whose bonnet-strings tie beneath the chin.